

# UNDERSTANDING COLLEGE ACCESS

By Michael Itzkowitz

The premium of obtaining a college degree is well documented. On average, a bachelor’s degree holder earns approximately \$2.8 million more than someone who has earned a high school diploma.<sup>1</sup> And, generally, they are often happier, healthier, and more likely to participate in their civic institutions.<sup>2</sup>

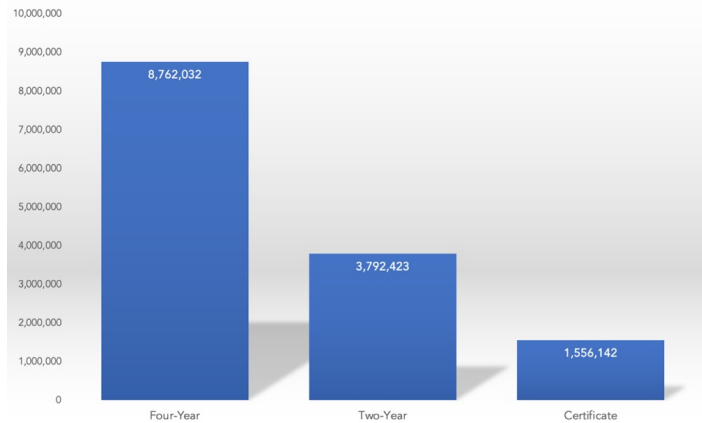
However, while obtaining a college degree can be beneficial in many ways, it’s also worth knowing who has access to those advantages in the first place. Does college mainly serve as an avenue to reproduce and strengthen existing power structures or is it actually an engine of socioeconomic mobility, as it claims to be?

In this paper, we provide a general overview on college access. Specifically, we explore who attends college nowadays, where they come from, and the disparities between those populations.

## What kind of postsecondary education do people pursue?

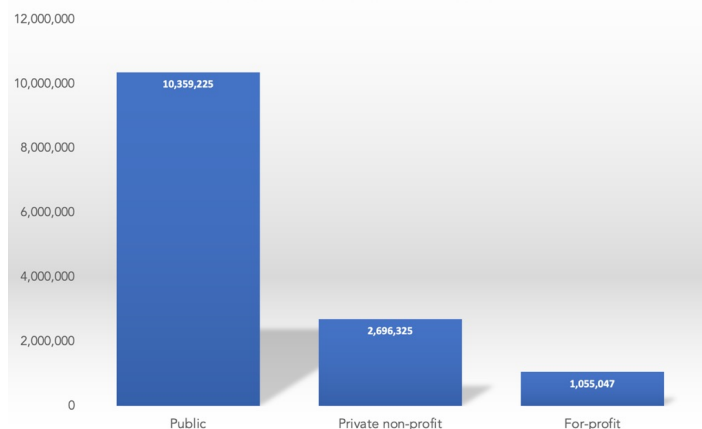
Most people (62%) who attend college enroll in four-year institutions. Yet, millions of students also attend other types of schools. Nearly four million students (27%) enroll in institutions that primarily award associate’s degrees, while over 1.5 million (11%) attend colleges that award short-term certificate programs.

TOTAL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS BY TYPE OF INSTITUTION



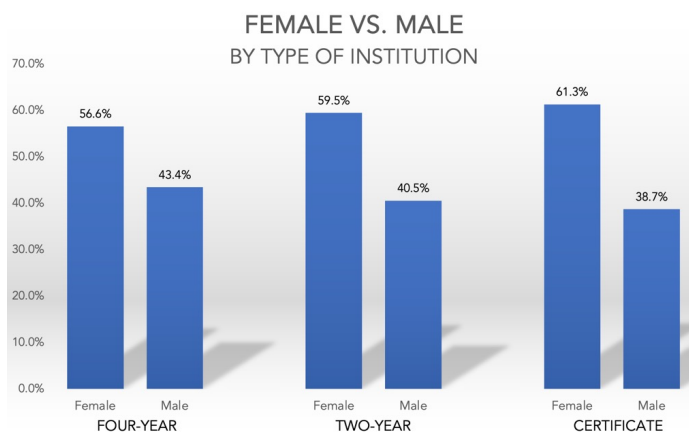
The majority of students attend public institutions (73%), as they are larger in nature and enroll more students, on average. Yet, private non-profit institutions still admit and enroll nearly 2.7 million (19%) undergraduate students per year, and for-profits serve just over a million (8%).

TOTAL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS BY SECTOR OF INSTITUTION

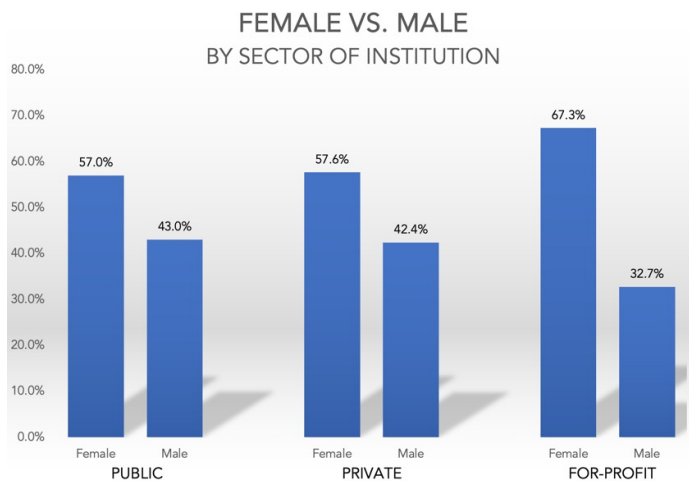


## Who enrolls in college?

Women who attend college far outnumber men, regardless of the type of institution offering the postsecondary degree. For example, nearly 57% of women make up the entire undergraduate population at four-year institutions. At less than four-year schools, the proportion is even higher, as approximately 60% of all students at, both, two-year and certificate-granting institutions are women.

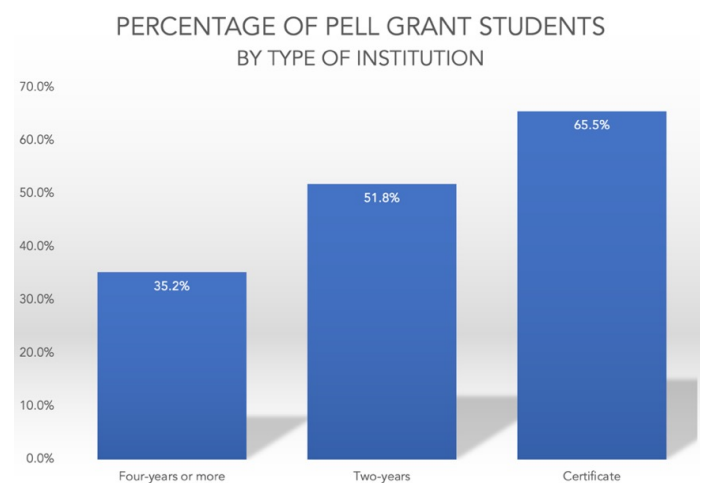


Women also disproportionately enroll in for-profit institutions. In fact, they make up over two-thirds (67.3%) of all enrollment in this sector of higher education compared to their male counterparts. At public and private institutions, women still make up the majority of enrollees at 57% and 57.6% of total enrollment, respectively.



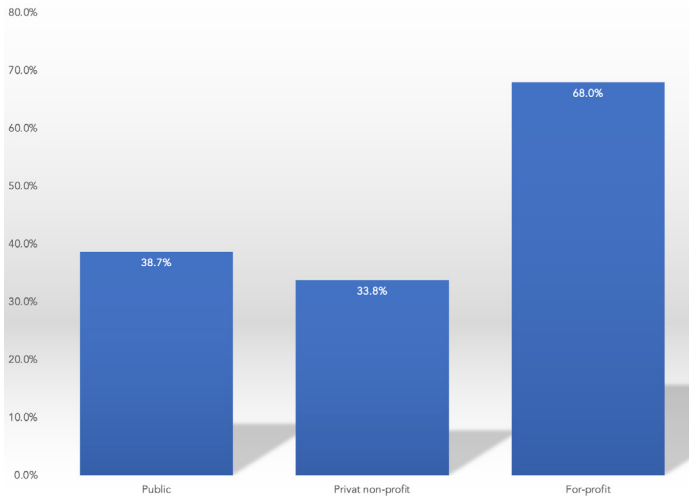
## Where do lower- and moderate-income students attend?

Pell Grants are a federal award to lower- and moderate-income students who attend college. It can also be used as a proxy to determine family income, as 97% of Pell Grant recipients come from families making \$60,000 per year or less.<sup>3</sup> These students are more likely to attend shorter-term programs, rather than enroll in longer-term degree programs. Specifically, just over a third (35.2%) make up the student body at four-year institutions. In contrast, lower- and moderate-income students make up nearly two-thirds (65.5%) of the total enrollment at institutions that primarily offer certificates.



Pell Grant students make up the vast majority of students at for-profit institutions, as almost seven out of every 10 students (68%) who attend these institutions come from low- and moderate-income backgrounds. They are much less likely to enroll at public (38.7%) or private (33.8%) institutions across the US.

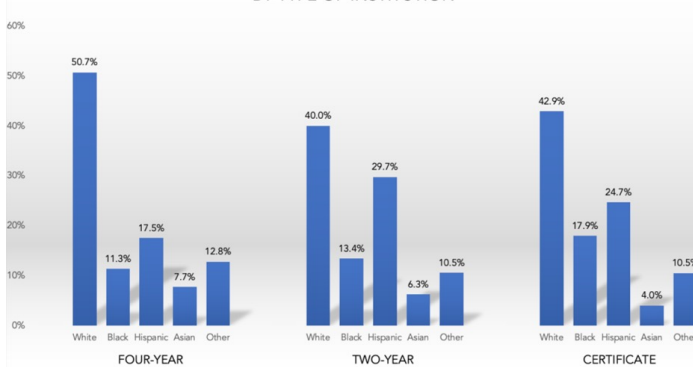
PERCENTAGE OF PELL GRANT STUDENTS  
BY SECTOR OF INSTITUTION



### What is the race and ethnicity of people who are accepted and enroll in postsecondary education?

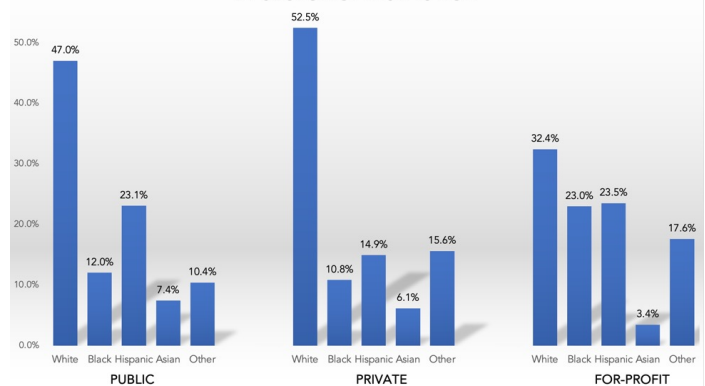
Overall, white students are the most likely to enroll in four-year (50.7%), two-year (40%), and certificate-granting (42.9%) institutions in comparison to other racial and ethnic groups. While the majority of students are enrolled at four-year institutions overall, two-year institutions and certificate programs have a higher proportion of Black and Hispanic students in comparison to four-year colleges.

RACE AND ETHNICITY  
BY TYPE OF INSTITUTION



On average, for-profit institutions enroll a higher proportion of underrepresented populations in comparison to white students. For example, Black students make up nearly twice the student body at for-profit institutions (23%) in comparison to public (12%) or private (10.8%) colleges. Hispanic students also make up a higher proportion of students at for-profit colleges (23.5%) than other types of institutions. In comparison, white students make up approximately half of attendees at public (47%) and private (52.5%) colleges across the US. Yet, they make up less than a third (32.4%) of attendees at for-profit institutions.

RACE AND ETHNICITY  
BY SECTOR OF INSTITUTION



### Conclusion

Underrepresented populations have different levels of access dependent on the type of institution in which they enroll. Specifically, women, lower-income students, and Black and Hispanic students all make up a larger part of the student population at less than four-year and for-profit institutions. In contrast, those from more well-off and white ethnic backgrounds are more likely to enroll in four-year colleges and those from the public and private non-profit sector. Depending on the outcomes that these schools produce, access may play an important part on determining the benefits to which a college degree has to offer, including higher lifetime earnings, better health outcomes, and a higher likelihood to be an active and engaged citizen.

Name	Description	Measurement Year	Source
Undergraduate Enrollment	Total undergraduate enrollment for certificate or degree-seeking students	2021-22	IPEDS
Undergraduate Enrollment - FEMALE	Total undergraduate enrollment for certificate or degree-seeking female students	2021-22	IPEDS
Pell Grant Enrollment	Percentage of undergraduates receiving a Pell Grant	2021-22	IPEDS
Undergraduate Enrollment by Race and Ethnicity	Total undergraduate enrollment for certificate or degree-seeking female students	2021-22	IPEDS

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<sup>1</sup> <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/the-college-payoff/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/its-not-just-the-money.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/08/24/fact-sheet-president-biden-announces-student-loan-relief-for-borrowers-who-need-it-most/>